

POLYTECHNIC OF TORINO
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Le Corbusier models for the Houses of the seventies by Richard Meier

by Antonio Ruffino

Tutor: Micaela Viglino Davico

Co-Tutor: Elena Dellapiana

Purpose of this thesis is overcoming the critical studies exclusively based on the formal similarity between the first Meier's projects and the purist villas of the Twenties by Le Corbusier. In correspondence with a historical analysis aiming to put Richard Meier's figure within a specific context and to focus on his essential themes to understand his architectonic conception, we will try to individuate the presence of the Le Corbusier's model which might have suggested to the American architect the composition of the houses of the Seventies. There are two experiences, made after his architecture degree obtained in Cornell in 1957, which demonstrate Meier's desire of reflecting on the linguistic aspects typical of this discipline: the first is represented by a painting research shared, at the end of the Fifties, with Frank Stella, protagonist of the Hard Edge Abstraction, the current interpreting art as the content and the expression of itself; the second is linked with the formalist didactics which the American architect will teach till 1973 at the Cooper Union with John Hejduk and Peter Eisenman. A confirmation of the formalist direction taken by Meier is in 1969 when John Hejduk, Peter Eisenman, Charles Gwathmey, Michael Graves and him promote the birth of the "Five Architects" group, with the aim of culturally raising the architectonic debate in the United States: such project finds a historic referent in the International Style show in 1932.

The project of Philip Johnson, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Alfred Barr of separating the functionalist political problems from the aesthetic ones of the European "Modern" is taken up again and brought forward through the New York institutional channels (MOMA, IAUS, UDC ...) by Johnson himself and the Five who, just like him, conceive "architecture as an art".

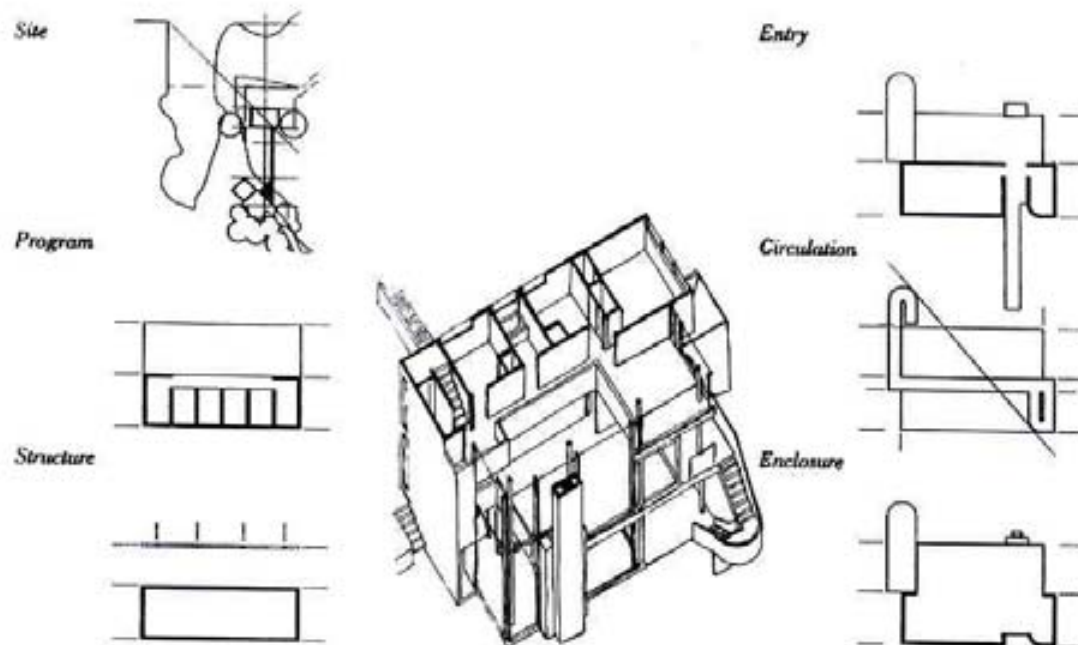
In a dialogue-interview it appears clearly that it is from the post-functionalist – according to Eisenman and Johnson – Le Corbusier that comes the first indictment against the "morality of the materials" of the Modern Movement. Obviously the theory of the Five on the purist villas of the Twenties suffers from this opinion, as they seem to be made of "cardboard". The first houses designed by Meier present themselves as *Cardboard Houses*, because their metal structure or the wood frame is often hidden to stress on the stylistic aspects going inspired Le Corbusier, easy to be found and therefore more intelligible.

The redefinition of Modernism, which appeals to the linguistic nature of architecture, cannot exclude Colin Rowe's comparative method, the critic who polarised the Anglo-Saxon culture for the formal analysis of Le Corbusier's work.

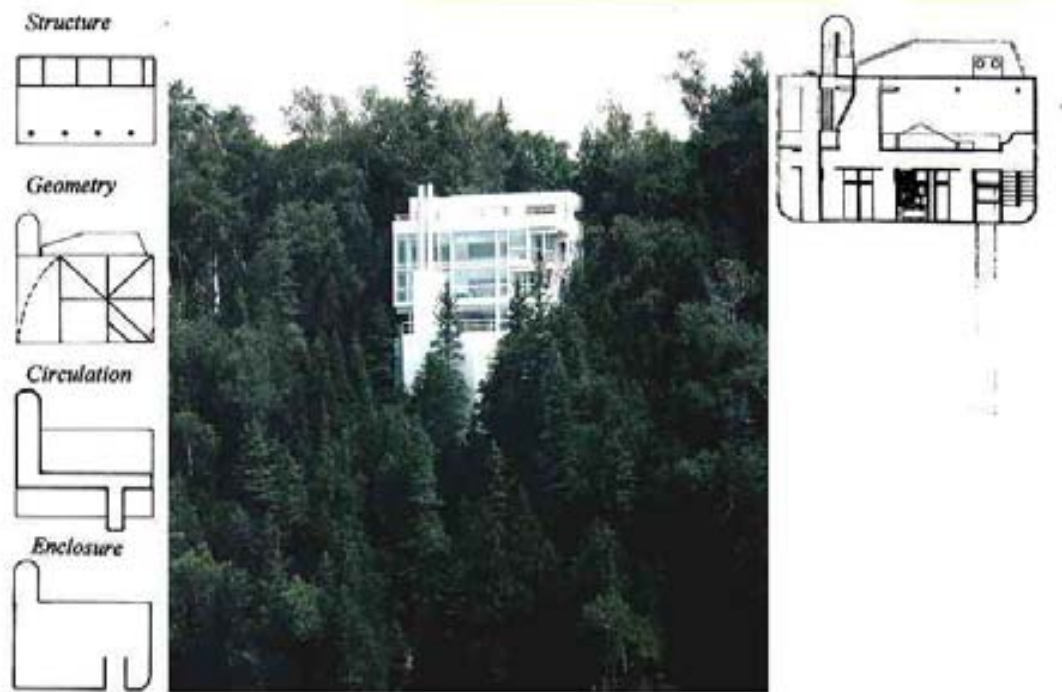
In the article *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa* of 1947, Rowe, interpreting the *plan libre* in terms of a simple evolution compared to the *plan paralysé* and detecting only a change in the style tunes between the villas by Le Corbusier and those by Palladio, not only rejects the ideological aspects, but also the formal results of Modernism. Unlike Rowe, Meier believes that it is necessary to keep working on the syntax of modern architecture in order to eliminate the "humanist" residuals which are still characterising it.

According to Alan Colquhoun, in fact, in the *Five Points* by Le Corbusier, there are still some "humanist" elements present: we cannot talk about a "revolutionary innovation", but rather of a reinterpretation, as long as the *conditio sine qua non* of the *Five Points* is the existence of the constructive elements of the architectonic tradition.

If the two English critics deny at architectonic level a radical transformation caused by the new techniques compared to the past, in the article *Les Heures Claires* Meier in 1973 moves the topic from the technologic to the linguistic level; still within the discipline: the Savoye Villa is, according to the American architect, a programmatic manifesto of "extreme clarity" of Modernity, if seen through the self-referents "discrete and correlated" elements (circulation, volume, structure, geometry) devised by Meier himself and not through the *Five Points* by Le Corbusier anymore.

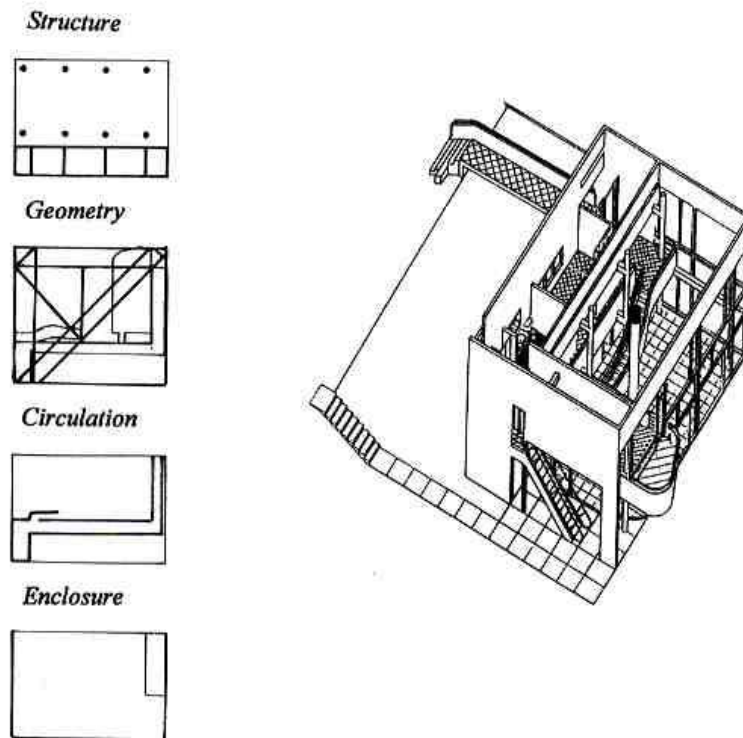


R. Meier, Smith House: discrete and correlated elements ,
Darien, Connecticut, 1965-67



R.

Meier, Douglas House: discrete and correlated elements,
Harbor Springs, Michigan, 1971-76



R. Meier, Shamberg House: discrete and correlated elements,
Chappaqua, New York, 1972-74

The decontextualisation of the theoretical *corpus* and of the architectonic solutions made in formalist terms by Le Corbusier leads to find a project strategy which Meier will then be constantly using for analysing and controlling the compositions of the Seventies.

Such transposition of the "humanist" *Five Points* into self-referential elements comports also a higher intelligibility and communicability for controlling the whole project. This last aspect is confirmed by the programs carried out at the end of the Seventies by the European schools of architecture, which find a common denominator in the formal research of the Cooper Union: for their higher flexibility, the *Five Points* are replaced by Daniel Treiber, teacher at the Ecole d'Architecture de Lille, with Meier's "discrete and correlated elements" useful for the successive spatial schemes made on the *Quatres Compositions* by Le Corbusier.

Finally the continuous use of the "discrete and correlated elements" as method also for the urban interventions with and historical importance made by the American architect demonstrate how much the first *houses* were actually a not negligible experimental laboratory.